

THE ROSS HOME IN BLADENSBURG MARYLAND

A THESIS AS AN INITIATION REQUIREMENT FOR TAU BETA PI

by

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SUMMARY

The Ross Home in Bladensburg, Maryland, has housed no prominent men; it is comparatively unknown; yet it should have some place in the annals of Maryland by right of its age and historic significance.

The house was built in the year 1749, by Dr. David Ross, for himself and his bride, Miss Ariana Brice. For the remainder of his life, he occupied the house and on his death, the property passed into the hands of his sons, David and Horatio. And so the house passed from father to son untill 1833, when it was purchased by Mr. Levi, Sheriff of Bladensburg. From this time until 1878, the house was rented out to various tenants. In 1878, it was purchased by a negro by the name of Samuel R. Lee. The property now belongs to William Lee, Samuel's son.

Perhaps the peak in the history of this house was reached in 1814, when the Battle of Bladensburg took place before its very door. During the battle, the house was used as a hospital for the wounded British soldiers, and it is said that those that died were buried in the garden at the rear of the house.

The house is not impressive at first sight, due to a need of repair; but on closer inspection, the sturdy construction and efficient workmanship becomes apparent. It is of brick, made in England and laid in Flemish Bond, about forty feet long by thirty feet deep. The house is two stories in height and has a pitched roof, truncated at the gable ends with deep dormer windows and massive brick chimneys at either end.

The interior is simple in plan, being typically Colonial; the fireplaces, seven in number, are particularly interesting, for they are of great size and excellent design.

INTRODUCTION

In the little town of Bladensburg, in the shadow of the nation's capital, there stands a house, forgotten and neglected, yet maintaining notwithstanding, an air of dignity and aloofness, by right of its age and historic significance.

For nearly two hundred years, this house has been a silent witness to the writings in the pages of the history of this nation. It has seen the immortal Washington pass by on his duties as father of this country; seen the people rise in the cause of Independence, and shed their life blood to maintain that cause. Later, at the threat of a nation, has witnessed a great battle, and sheltered within it the dead and the wounded; and after the battle, watched as the victorious enemy marched on the nation's capital, and desecrated the memory of its founder with smoke and flame. Then in the years to see the drama and the tragedy in the moulding of our country as it stands today. }

These are the things that the house has obviously witnessed, but who knows or can tell the drama, the pathos and the love that it enfolds in its personality forever.

Today it stands at the intersection of two great highways, watching the flux of human beings who pass unnoticed, and no doubt smiling inwardly at their hurried passage in pursuit of life, oblivious of so ancient and learned a personage.

This house, the Ross home, is seemingly jealous of its history, and in the pages that follow, there are gaps that cannot be filled, through a lack of interest in those that have lived within and around it.

HISTORY

In the early part of the eighteenth century, the Eastern branch of the Potomac river, on whose banks the town of Bladensburg is now located, was quite a busy shipping center. Vessels from the Old World unloaded their cargoes of building materials, liquors, and all those articles that this country was not as yet producing, and carried away agricultural products, principally tobacco and corn, back to their home ports overseas. The village of Garrison's Landing, now Bladensburg, was one of the main shipping points.

In the year 1742, in the Acts of the Maryland Assembly, appears an act, giving a charter to certain residents in the vicinity of Garrison's Landing, empowering them to incorporate a town in the vicinity ^{of} if this place, to be known as Bladensburg. One of these ^{was} Dr. David Ross.

The next reference to this gentleman appears in the Maryland Gazette for the year 1749. It is an announcement of his marriage to Miss Ariana Brice. The year 1749 is the year generally believed to be the date of construction of the Ross house in Bladensburg, for this reason, and also because this date appears on two iron fire backs in the house.

It is very likely that the newly-weds set up housekeeping here, and in the next few years prospered. Dr. Ross evidently became of some prominence, for the records at Marlboro show him to have been appointed magistrate of the community, and gives quite a list of his convictions.

The name of Dr. Ross again appears in the Acts of the Maryland Assembly for the year 1773. It is an act designating certain public warehouses for the inspection and taxation of tobacco, and for Bladensburg, naming the land of Dr. David Ross.

This house and the land around it then became the scene of busy activity, as the farmers from the surrounding country, brought in the great hogsheads of fragrant tobacco to be inspected and assayed, and the lines of slaves, loading and unloading the sloops from the Old World passed by its doors.

As far as the records show, two sons were born to the Ross's in this house, Horatio and David, into whose hands passed the house and the property belonging to old Dr. Ross, when he died in 1779. This date is a little uncertain, but the acts of the Maryland Assembly for the year 1779 contain an act to enlarge the powers of Ariana Ross, executrix of Dr. David Ross deceased.

The house was occupied for the next few years by the son David, who became of some importance as a political figure, writing several books on foreign relations, and being at one time a member of the Maryland Legislature. In the year 1798, he was appointed one of a committee to audit the accounts of the city of Washington by General Washington. At his death around the year 1815, the house and property passed into the hands of his son William Ross.

The only reference to this gentleman, appears in the records at Marlboro, wherein at his death in 1828, he left the property to his heirs, who they were no one seems to know.

This period in the history of this house, is most probably the highlight in its history, for at its very doors the battle of Bladensburg took place, August 24, 1814. The story goes that General Ross and Armiral Cockburn the commanders of the invading column, that had come overland from Benedict on the Patuxent River, took breakfast in this house, on the day of the memorable fight, and that after the engagement, many of the British wounded were taken into the house, and those that died were buried in the garden at the back of the house. there are some difficulties in the way of that belief

however, because according to most accounts, the battle was opened by English cannon from Lowndes hill east of the house, at about noon. The action developed rapidly, the English line soon left the house to its rear, the crossing of the Eastern Branch, where it is narrow and fordable, was forced, and the main fighting took place on lands about a mile and a half southwest of the Ross house. The English had not come up with the Ross house when the engagement opened, and after the opening of the battle, it is not likely that General Ross and Admiral Cockburn stopped to eat. No view of the main field of action is to be had from the Ross house, and it is not probable that the English opened headquarters in rear of their small force. It is likely that it was used as a hospital however, as it was well protected, and the buttons and other accouterments of British soldiers have been dug up in the garden at the rear.

This period in its history seemed to be the peak, and from then on little can be found concerning it. After the death of William Ross, there is a gap in the records as to who owned the house. In 1833 a gentleman by the name of Levi Sherriff, who had been a merchant in Bladensburg, and who was then seeking active retirement from business at the age of fifty-six, bought a great deal of property in and around Bladensburg, this purchase included the Ross house and the property surrounding it. From this time until 1878, the house was rented out to various tenants, one of these the eccentric Judge Purcell occupied it for many years.

In the year 1878, the Ross home was purchased by a negro, Samuel K. Lee, who came to Bladensburg from the Pohick neighborhood of Virginia. Samuel left the house to his son William O. Lee, who recently died in West Virginia. At the present time, the house is a tourists home, and is occupied by William's cousin, Mrs. Alberta Gunn.

In Green Hill cemetery in Bladensburg, there is a tall monument, with the following inscription:

William Ross died April 16, 1828.

Harriet Ross died April 24, 1854.

Mabeline Ross died April 17, 1865.

Sarah Ross died November 6, 1870.

Mary Ross died January 21, 1883.

Mary Louisa Ross Thompson died October 25, 1896.

Robert T. Ross died February 22, 1901.

CONSTRUCTION

From a distance the Ross home is not impressive in its appearance, due to neglect on the part of the tenants, but on closer inspection, the sturdy construction and manifestation of care in construction becomes apparent.

It is very likely, that the material used in its construction came from England, as there were no brick kilns or lumber mills in existence in this country at the time of its erection. Due to this relative scarcity of material, and the fact that unskilled slave labor was used in erecting it, the house is simple in design, following the general run of early colonial architecture.

The house is of brick, remarkably well preserved for their age, laid in Flemish bond. That is, instead of in the modern way, where the bricks are laid end for end through the thickness of the wall, every other brick is laid cross-wise, leaving a space, and a projecting surface to which the inner wall material may be attached. In this way a wall is produced with the same strength and durability, but which represents a great saving in material.

In general, the house is about forty feet long by thirty feet deep, two stories in height, having a pitched roof, truncated at the gable ends, with deep dormer windows, and massive brick chimneys at either end. In the interior, the mantle pieces are of particular interest. There are seven in the house, four on the first floor, and three on second. They are very large and typically colonial. The window seats are of wood, narrow and deep, and the ceiling moulding are all of wood, made and framed in England.

The porch at the present time is not the original, in fact photographs and sketches made at different periods, all show a different one. The porch at the present time is of stone and mortar, overlaid with concrete, extending almost across the entire front. In the floor plans that follow, made in 1925 by Mr. Erb, a Washington architect, the porch is small, giving it a more marked colonial appearance.

The entrance to the house is at the center of the front, the front door being equipped with brass knocker evidently very old. The entrance hall is long and narrow, about five by thirteen, from which three doors open, one at either side, and one at the extreme end.

The rooms to either side of this hall are of the same size, fifteen by thirteen, having three windows, two at the front and one at the side. Just what these rooms might be designated, is a matter of speculation, for the only doorway to the rooms is in the entrance hall, they being entirely segregated from the rest of the house. Both of the rooms are equipped with fire places, and in the back of the fire place in the left room as you enter, there is an iron fire-back or backplate, which has long been the object of curious speculation. They are about thirty inches in length by twenty-four inches in height, and bear the following inscription:

ROOS

ROOS

OTVXENT--1749

Just what it is or what it means has never been determined, but it seems to indicate the year 1749 as the date of its erection. The character between the R and S is shaped like a heart, and may be intended for a double O, ROOS, or possibly ROSS. It is just possible, that the inscription OTVXENT, is some form slightly obliterated, of the word Patuxent. Particularly likely, since at that time, there was an iron works of that name.

The doorway at the end of the entrance hall leads into a large room, fifteen by eighteen; ^{feet} in the right extreme corner is located the stairway. This room was probably the dining room, as the room to the right was very likey the kitchen, since it contains a huge fireplace, the mantle of which is ten feet long and six feet high. The room to the left is similiar to the kitchen, being about ten by twelve, and lighted by two windows.

The stairway is of wood, having a ninety degree turn to the front four steps from the first floor. At the top of the stairs there is a small hallway, six by twelve, on which all of the rooms on this floor open. Directly to the right of the stairs there is a small room, six by eight, that today would have been the bath, but at the time of construction was called a linen-closet.

The front of the house on this floor is divided into three rooms, one large one and two smaller ones. The larger room, perhaps the master's bedroom, is twelve by fifteen, equipped with a large fireplace and well lighted by two large windows. The other two rooms, possibly guest rooms, are nine by ten and ten by fifteen, respectively. No doubt the guests were a little cold in the winter, for these are the only rooms in the house not equipped with some means of heating.

The two rooms to the rear are both eleven by fifteen, both have fireplaces and were no doubt the mistress's bedroom and the nursery.

The general plan of the house is obviously simple, even as is the exterior; the only ornate part of it is a small frieze that runs around the front of the roof edge.

In the tax bills for 1798, preserved in the library of the Maryland Historical Society, there is evidence that this house was, at one time, surrounded by quite a tract of land and boasted several outbuildings for housing the slaves and storing tobacco; the evaluation was twelve hundred dollars. Today it is worth little more and is flanked by a barbecue and a number of sheds.

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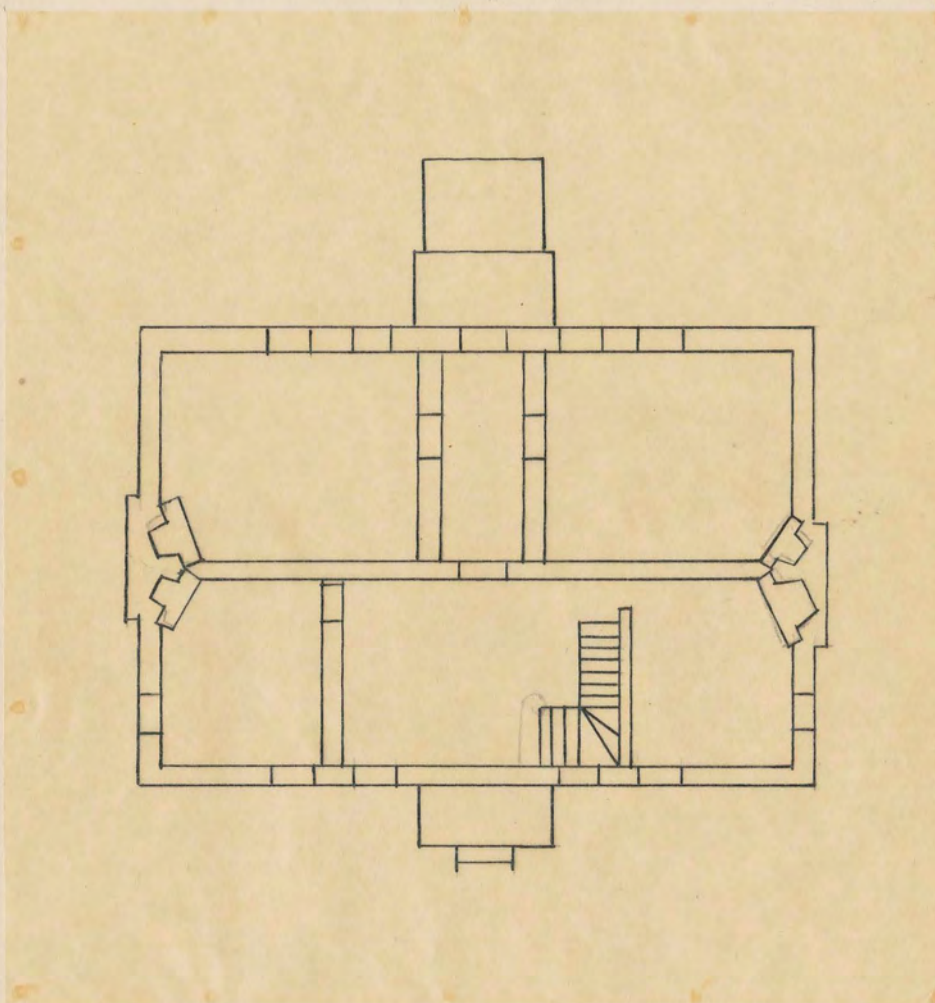
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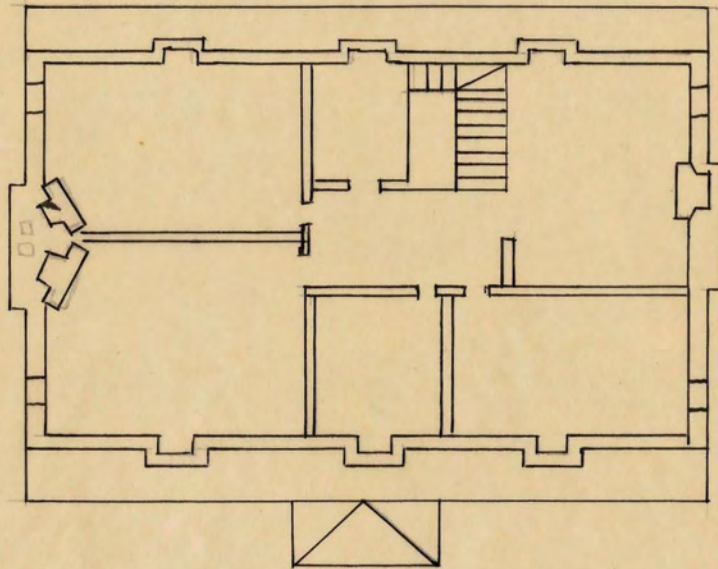
PHOTOGRAPHS





FIRST FLOOR

0 3 6 9 12 15
SCALE IN FEET



SECOND FLOOR

0 3 6 9 12 15

SCALE IN FEET